

***Same Source, Different Stories: An Exploration in the Design of
Political Advertising***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

Advertising and visual messages have long been a source of public debate due to the gray area they occupy within biases and half-truths, especially since the advent of social media. Online targeted communications can spread rapidly with little external validation. This thesis represents a creative exploration of the power personally held by visual communications developers, with a focus on how information and design can be manipulated to present different viewpoints. The final product is a series of 6 ads depict opposing viewpoints that Americans may have on the social issue of Muslim populations in America. These advertisements, developed for social media, namely Facebook, are made in pairs that feature the same sources of information as arguments for and against three specific concerns regarding Muslim Americans: terrorism, cultural adaptation, and economic and societal participation. The purpose of the advertisements is to demonstrate not only the decisions that an advertising designer can make based on his or her own goals and biases, but to give viewers pause in thinking about how they receive, validate and accept information in the realm of social media communications.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Michelle O'Malley, for encouraging limitless creativity and pushing my academic limits these past 4 years. Her insights for this project were invaluable as I navigated through personal uncertainty.

I would also like to thank my closest loved ones for helping me to build the strength and motivation to succeed with this project, as with all my academic pursuits. I know these past few months have been a doozy.

Process Analysis Statement

For my Honors Thesis, I wanted to develop a creative project that combines my area of study, advertising, with an issue of social justice. I've always had a passion for making my work meaningful beyond myself and my clients, and this was the perfect opportunity, given the circumstances of the time. For a more complete understanding of this project, it is important to note the social and political events occurring during its creation. In the months of late 2016 and early 2017, President Donald Trump was elected, inaugurated, and signed into effect an executive order which placed travel bans on people from predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States. I, like many of my peers, watched these stories unfold through the lens of my Facebook feed as opposed to traditional television and print news media.

Online, I observed many heated exchanges throughout the election season and after President Trump signed the executive order. Families and friends became polarized through political and social disagreements. What I found most interesting was that many of these exchanges took place without any real written words. Instead, the use of imagery to make belief statements was often used in place of a written status update. For example, someone might have shared a photo of an American flag with a written sentiment on it about preserving America's economy and population against foreigners, while another person reacted to said photo with an angry emoji (a graphical icon used to represent emotion) to express their disagreement. I noticed that these visual messages sometimes featured unverified statistics and one-sided emotional appeals, yet were still being shared widely; the comment sections flooded with people vehemently fact-checking, only to be refuted by another fact or argument in opposition, until it seemed like any statement could be argued into or out of validity.

While fasting from the veritable circus that had become post-election Facebook, I imagined what the people who had been creating these visual communications, essentially advertisements for a belief system or political party, were thinking. Certainly they must have felt their message was important, but did they consider the potential impact of sharing that message? Had they considered the evidence supporting the opposing viewpoint and decided to carry forward anyways, or was this a purely emotional gut reaction to what was happening in the world around them? Did they know that they failed to represent the “big picture” of an issue? While I could possibly never know the answers to these questions, I knew that my role in my career as a future advertiser and visual communicator was tied to these phenomena. While advertisements are traditionally thought of as direct messages used to make a sale, advertisements as visual communication tools can be used to promote belief systems, political parties and other organizations that represent specific causes, such as non-profits. In viewing such visual tactics on Facebook as advertisements, I imagined myself in the shoes of their designers. What if I worked for an organization that wanted to develop a visual communication in response to Trump’s travel ban that I personally disagreed with; would it really be that hard to create? The need to represent both sides of an argument is natural for me, though it generally disagrees with traditions of advertising. I found myself torn between these two standards, left to wonder what the impact of being one-sided in creating a visual communication might be, both for myself and for viewers.

This is where I got the idea of doing a direct comparison with social media visual communications for and against Muslims in America. I asked myself if the viewers of such advertisements really think about what they share. Social media ads are so easily digestible and sent on for the next person to see, at a faster rate than was ever available with more traditional

advertisements in magazines and newspapers. My firsthand experience and advertising education have shown me that the emotional component of a visual communication is often what catches a viewer's attention, with fear being an especially compelling hook. Discussion with my peers, family and mentor led me to develop the visuals in three major areas of fear related to Muslim Americans: terrorism, economic impact (jobs and welfare), and cultural adaptation. The goal for each ad pair was to allay and ignite fear in viewers. Especially emotional reactions can become charged to the extent where viewer corroboration of the actual information presented becomes less important. For this reason, I decided to develop the pairs using data and quotations from the same sources in order to make a point about the lack of clarity involved in determining accuracy of information. My sources are credible, but I will admit, cherry-picking statistics and a good deal of selective wording became essential to the process.

For the informational component of the ads, I spent hours doing research for credible sources that could be used to validate both sides of each argument. This was no easy task, and throughout my research I felt the encroaching guilt of knowing I'd have to be very selective of data I decided to present. This is something that advertisers do to tell their story every day; but knowing that I'd chosen such a polarizing topic made me want to tell the entire story as opposed to telling each side separately.

I pressed on and eventually found a study done by Pew Research Center entitled, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism." Overall, this report paints a positive portrait of Muslim Americans. However, as I examined some of the data it became clear to me just how easily someone with different intentions from my own could select certain statistics and take them out of context to demonize the same population that the study was supporting. I carried on with this mindset, giving attention to a table with particular

language that could easily be interpreted in a number of ways regarding what is most likely the number one concern related to Muslim Americans: terrorism.

<i>Suicide bombing/ other violence against civilians is justified to defend Islam from its enemies ...</i>					
U.S. Muslims	Some- Often times Rarely Never DK				
	%	%	%	%	%
2011	1	7	5	81	6=100
2007	1	7	5	78	9=100
Native born	1	10	9	79	1=100
African Amer.	0	16	12	73	0=100
Other	2	7	7	83	1=100
Foreign born	1	6	3	82	9=100

*Figure 1. Large majority continues to reject suicide bombing.
This table represents Muslim-American sentiment towards
violence and can be interpreted for differing arguments (Pew
Research Center, 2011).*

I chose to interpret this data in this way: that

as of 2011, 81% of Muslim Americans

would never justify violence, so the

remaining 19% (roughly 1 in 5) must

therefore be able to justify it in some ways.

When removing the nuance of the data, such

as a respondent answering “don’t know,” or

the omitting the frequency with which they say violence is justified, 1 in 5 represents a scary statistic (Pew Research Center, 2011). That number could be easily is easily glossed over and accepted by anyone who chooses not to have a look at the chart for themselves. This is a prime example of the potential pitfalls of using data in making a political claim, as well as the dangers of blindly accepting a statistic found in a photo seen on Facebook. For those precise reasons, I chose to utilize this interpretation for my visuals.

The Pew study also provided me with more qualitative claims to make regarding cultural assimilation, where “most” (56%) American Muslims say that they want to adopt American culture, yet “half” (49%) of them primarily self-identify as Muslim rather than American. These statements are problematic for number of reasons (Pew, 2011). They seem to directly contradict each other, although perhaps a constructive discussion with someone who is Muslim American could help to reveal some of the nuances between each statement, wherein lies a more accurate truth. In teasing out these “facts” from the data, I found that such a polarized subject does not

always lend itself accurately to one-sided presentation. It is easier in the process of developing a visual communication to make succinct, although somewhat inaccurate claims such as these to prove a particular point.

Information from the study also helped me to make arguments related to Muslims and the American Dream: the idea that anyone can work hard and be successful in America. According to the same Pew report, “Muslims endorse the view that hard work will lead to success at higher rates (74%) than the American public overall, among whom 62% say most people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard” (2011). However, later in the study, it is noted that nearly 1/3 of all Muslim Americans are un- or underemployed. While this sounds jarring in comparison (and indeed is perfect fodder for an anti-Muslim campaign), I read on to find that this is at a rate only 9% higher than the American public; largely due to the cultural importance placed on the family. Muslim women stay home to care for children and their senior relatives instead of working. This can also be attributed to less job opportunity related to language barriers (Pew, 2011). These caveats, which are not represented in the alarming statistic of 1/3 unemployment, pained me to exclude from my final works. However, the goal I set for myself was to play a sort of “devil’s advocate” for both sides of the issue, which taught me an important lesson in storytelling.

I also chose to utilize different information sources in developing my visuals, namely quotes from President Trump and excerpts from the Bible and Quran, the holy text of Islam. Personal observation has shown me that opponents of Muslim culture often cite Quran verses that are related to violence in the name of Islam and battery and abuse of women. Thinking back on my own Christian background, I considered Bible verses that reflect some of the same sentiments. For example, Ephesians 5:23 and Quran 4:34 both discuss the nature of the wife being a man’s property, with almost exactly mirrored language. While a presiding theme in the

Quran relates to protection of religion and elimination of people of other creeds, as with verse 3:28 condemning Muslims from befriending non-believers, lest we forget that the Bible also represents similar ideals, as with God's command for ethnic cleansing in 1 Samuel 15. In short, I learned that Quran verses can certainly sound frightening taken out of context. However, when they are compared with Biblical passages, I saw a theme of archaic values and texts that are often not followed by modern congregations. Drawing from this disconnect, I chose to highlight such passages in my visuals.

Donald Trump, now president of the United States, is author to a wide range of tweets and quotes related to Muslims, and this is why I decided to research and utilize his thoughts in this project. For some, he is demonizing and hateful towards minorities; for others, an intelligent businessman whose thoughts should be given consideration. Regardless of what camp and individual may fall in, President Trump's words are heard and read by many, often resulting in charged responses. Perhaps his most outright disparaging statement against Muslims occurred during an interview for Jake Tapper's *State of the Union* on CNN in 2015. During this conversation he defends one of his supporters' claims that Muslims are a problem. "Most Muslims, like most everything, I mean, these are fabulous people [...]" he cedes, "But we certainly do have a problem [...] it wasn't people from Sweden that blew up the World Trade Center, Jake" (CNN Press Room, 2015).

In what appears to be a direct contrast to this anti-Muslim statement, Trump tweeted with a very tolerant sentiment earlier that year related to religion.

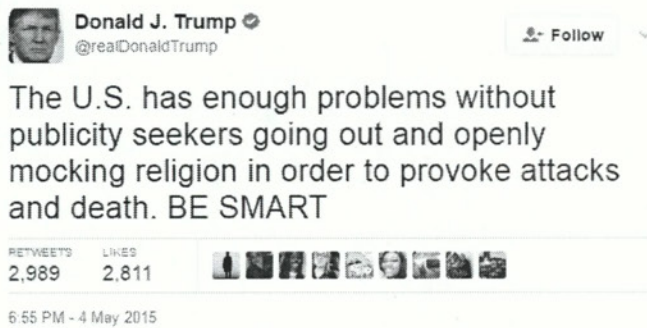


Figure 2. Tweet from Donald Trump. This statement expresses a much different sentiment when compared to the discussion with Jake Tapper later that year (Trump, 2015).

Reading this tweet, it seems as though

Trump is speaking out against the sentiment he would later express in the

Tapper interview. For both Trump's

supporters and opposition, how could one

know which of these statements to

accept? While President Trump is indeed only human and cannot be infallible in a rapidly changing political and social sphere, his statements hold gravity due to the nature of his position. These quotes, especially when taken out of context, seem to support exclusively opposing ideas, and can easily be used to argue in affirmation of and opposition to American Muslims. Because Trump represents a figurehead of controversial political opinion, I felt the inclusion of his thoughts were necessary to demonstrate both points of view in this project.

The final research component of this project involved finding information related to fears Americans may hold about the economic impact of accepting Muslim immigrants, particularly refugees, into the country. Data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) does not break down by religion. However, for the ORR's annual report to Congress for the fiscal year 2015, 15 countries accounted for 97% of refugee admissions, with 6 of them being predominantly Muslim, and at least 3 others having significant Muslim populations. Refugees from Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Iran and Afghanistan alone account for over 40% of the 69,933 refugees taken in 2015 (Office of Refugee Resettlement). This data represents the idea that information from the ORR may not be generalizable for all Muslim refugees. However, I chose to use that data in full knowledge of that potential issue for a number of reasons, a major one being that the ORR is

otherwise the most reliable source for determining how government dollars are spent on refugees. It also serves a dual purpose to demonstrate that a notable amount of immigrants are not Muslims, while simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that the ORR cannot publish data based on religious belief. Depending on one's personal views, this is either highly problematic or a matter of privacy and security for the refugees. The ambiguity of the ORR data only serves as another example of the ambiguity and duality of trying to condense down complex arguments for visual communications.

Given that a common concern I've seen about Muslim refugees is their contribution society and potential drain on welfare dollars that could be going to natural born citizens, I chose to utilize data about labor force participation (LFP) rates and cash/medical assistance payouts. According to the ORR, "Measured in fall 2015, the overall labor force participation rate (LFP) for adults in ASR respondent households fluctuated between 58.3 percent for 2015 arrivals and 69.3 percent for 2011 arrivals, ultimately approximating that of the total U.S. population (67.7 percent)" (2015). This data corroborates the idea that Muslim Americans believe in working hard for success, however, there are nuances within this data. For example, there is a 29 point difference in LFP between Muslim females and males, with males being more employed, while in the US the difference is only 13 points (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). One could argue that perhaps Muslim cultural norms are preventing able-bodied women from contributing to the workforce, while others may argue that this separation has to do with social barriers within the United States related to minority women.

Refugees to the United States are generally eligible for most federal assistance programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). When they are not eligible for

these programs, they may receive short-term Cash and Medical Assistance (CMA) from state grants paid by the ORR. According to the ORR's Annual Report to Congress in 2015, this payout alone, not including any other benefit or social service, amounted to \$285,856,800. This number represents payouts that can only be given to refugees who are otherwise not eligible or compliant with standards for TANF or SSI. This group of refugees receiving CMA can easily be demonized for "not following the rules," however, each refugee situation is different, and many have a hard time in navigating the jargon and red tape in applying for and receiving other types of assistance. According to the Internal Revenue Service's most recently available tax data, 148,606,578 tax returns were filed for 2014 (2015). This amounts to each taxpayer (or married couple filing jointly) contributing just over \$0.50 annually to support refugees, a rather marginal amount compared to the startling number of almost \$300 million in total. Being able to research these portions of refugee economic impact helped me to see why so many find this tenet of the issue so problematic. When money is involved, it is easy to have an emotional reaction. For this reason, I included the LFP and CMA payouts in my final product with full knowledge that there was more to the story than meets the eye.

Once I'd finished compiling my data and solidifying arguments, I began to brainstorm the visual representation of the pieces. In order to develop the highly emotional catches required of successful social media advertising, I pulled inspiration from American World War II-era propaganda posters. I have always been an enthusiast of all things mid-century, and was so pleased when this idea happened upon me. In a way, the elements of those posters reflect the goals of my advertisements. On the defensive end, they identify and caricaturize some vague "enemy" that somehow stands to threaten American-ness at its core. During WWII this was communism, but now it could be the religion of Islam. For defensive purposes, they provide

uplifting and unifying themes for the home front, and inspiration for the people to throw away any reservations and commit themselves to believing in a cause for the greater good. During WWII, this involved enthusiastic participation in rationing and saving materials to win a war, but now it involves mindful acceptance and understanding of religious differences in order to develop a more free and diverse nation.

The vintage aesthetics also serve as commentary on the more conservative and less diverse times in America's history. Times that people tend to feel strongly about either returning to or distancing themselves from as much as possible. The look also can appeal to a sense of nostalgia, something that is taught in advertising as possessing an immense emotional appeal, even to those who may have never experienced that time period. Using the WWII aesthetic, combined with simple headlines that make clear a particular stance and bold, self-explanatory visuals, these ads possess the power to garner emotional reactions. I researched examples of the WWII posters and began to develop typeface selection, color choices, and visual elements.

The examples provided here demonstrate an overview of the aesthetic: limited color palettes with emphasis on red, white and blue, bold and blocky typefaces contrasted with handwritten ones, simple and gripping headlines, and impactful illustrations. In keeping with the color schemes for my own project, I selected a palette of muted red and blue with some beige to pull age and nostalgia in. Niveau Grotesk and Myriad Pro stood in for the blocky typefaces in the original posters, while a web-sourced typeface, Komika Display Caps, emulated the high-energy, handwritten feel of the original scripts.

For the first set of posters that touch on the issue of terrorism, I made Trump the primary figure. Faces tend to draw a viewer's attention, and this method also represents the people-centric approaches of the WWII posters. I sourced images from Newsweek and Getty Images,

then used Photoshop in order to make them appear as paintings rather than photos. A combination of posterization (a filter used to make images look “cartoonish”), blurring, layer



Figure 3. Uncle Sam. This poster represents themes of patriotism with use of the color red, white and blue. (Flagg, 1917)

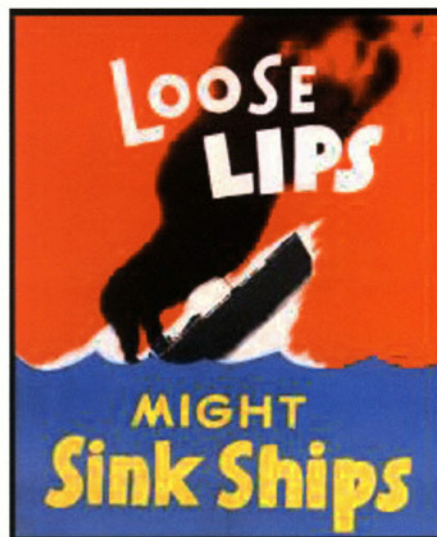


Figure 4. Loose lips might sink ships. The bold, graphic styling of this poster pairs well with the heavy typeface (Goff, 1942).



Figure 5. Victory starts here! This poster represents high-energy themes through typeface selection, with styling similar to that of a comic book (Bates, 1942))



Figure 6. Am I proud! I'm fighting famine... by canning food at home. Here the poster creates a sense of obligation and urgency, again with the use of red and blue (Williams, 1946).

adjustments, and selective smudging was used to achieve the final product. I layered the images over solid backgrounds of red and blue to make them stand out, adding a subtle gradient to the background for depth.

For contrast, I chose not to use Trump's quotes for both headlines. Because the image of Trump pointing to his head plays well with the headline of "Be Smart," I utilized this connection and added a speech bubble to emulate the famous "Rosie the Riveter" poster, propagated with the fact related to Muslim opposition to violence. When read top to bottom, this poster tells a story. The viewer is commanded and given reason to follow the command, much like the WWII posters. For the oppositional piece, I thought Trump's quote would make a more convincing headline on its own when coupled with the perceived anger on his face in the photo. Here, Trump is literally pointing to the problem, just as he did in the interview which produced the quote. The accusatory nature extends through the "fact" that Muslims are a dangerous group of people.

In developing the second set of posters related to culture, I found that the best way to represent opposing ideological ideas was through symbolism rather than photographs. Because these arguments rely heavily on interpretations from the Bible and Qur'an, I utilized the corresponding symbols of the Christian cross and Islamic star and crescent, as well as the American flag to represent American cultural values. These simple images alone represent centuries of beliefs and traditions, where many people are able to make mental and emotional ties. The simplest way to convey my research findings that the Bible and Qur'an both contain outdated and impractical teachings was through the headline, "Old Books, Old Values." My hope is that American Christians would see this and use a degree of introspection before forming an opinion. Layering the brief passages from each text over its corresponding symbol shows the similarity I am trying to convey. I used the data about cultural adaptation in order to tie the ideas that not only is the Qur'an on par with the Bible in certain aspects, but it does not completely limit Muslims from adapting to American culture.

The exact opposite of this idea is portrayed in the next poster, shown through the American flag symbolically eclipsing the star and crescent. Here, another Qur'an teaching is used to contrast the idea of Muslims becoming American, for according to their text, they cannot take non-believers (in this case, interpreted as non-Muslims) as allies. Using the Muslim identity statistic supports this idea as well. To sum up these ideas, I crafted the simple headline, "Muslims: Not Americans." The angled text boxes reflect a technique seen in a number of the WWII examples, and the use of the solid color backgrounds with gradients for depth is intentional in order to avoid detracting from the text in both pieces.

The final set of posters are related to economic impact. Patriotic ideals are often represented through the American dream, Uncle Sam, and the American flag. These themes and symbols compose the majority of the original WWII posters, and as I determined, must be carried through these designs as well. Disparate to these symbols is something that has recently become distinctly representative of Muslims: the Hijab. My intention in combining these elements for the first piece was to show that "American-ness" is not limited to the traditional ideals we see represented in the WWII-era images. In this poster, I showed that the American dream is no longer limited to being a good citizen and supporting prevailing politics and war efforts. Now, it can be represented through the likes of an immigrant or refugee coming to the United States with higher hopes of hard work and success than the rest of the nation. The data reflects that ideal and can serve to remind viewers that America was originally a country of refugees and immigrants, which is how I came to develop the headline, "The Real American Dream."

Muslim opponents can view allowing refugees to "steal" American tax dollars as literally helping the enemy. I saw the best way of conveying this idea to be through the emulation of the

famous Uncle Sam “I Want You...” poster. In my version, Uncle Sam is instead commanding Muslim refugees to stop tolling on the American economic system, as evidenced through seemingly appalling numbers related to employment and refugee payouts. This piece lumps together Muslim Americans, immigrants, and refugees in a reflection of similar narratives I’ve experienced in other visual communications. This creates an effusive scapegoat that viewers can readily express resentment towards. In direct opposition to the patriotic hijab-wearing Muslim woman, Uncle Sam shows that it is unpatriotic to allow assistance and opportunity to Muslims entering America. The bordered edges and background colors of both pieces serve to unite them visually, which also reflecting the original Uncle Sam Poster.

The final posters on the whole serve to represent the work and research devoted to develop this creative project. However, the process of their development taught me a number of lessons. As previously touched upon, I found the process of selectively choosing facts from research to be mentally and emotionally challenging. Pushing my own personal bias aside in pursuit of similar representations for both sides of the issue was a challenge for me. This practice will undeniably help me in my future career, learning to suppress bias in research and design. This process also exposed how design elements can be used so deliberately to make a point. This is not something I was unaware of previously, but the efforts involved in designing something politically persuasive made it more obvious. The goal of the vast majority of my design projects has been overall visual appeal with consistent theme and messages. This is a different process compared to developing opposing pieces for simultaneous viewing, where colors and images reflect not only in their own pieces, but against the opposing piece as well. Overall, I found the process of designing and carrying out this project to be a personal challenge with a beautifully

rewarding end result. It reflects my personal passions, and it has helped me to grow as an advertiser, designer and overall visual communicator.

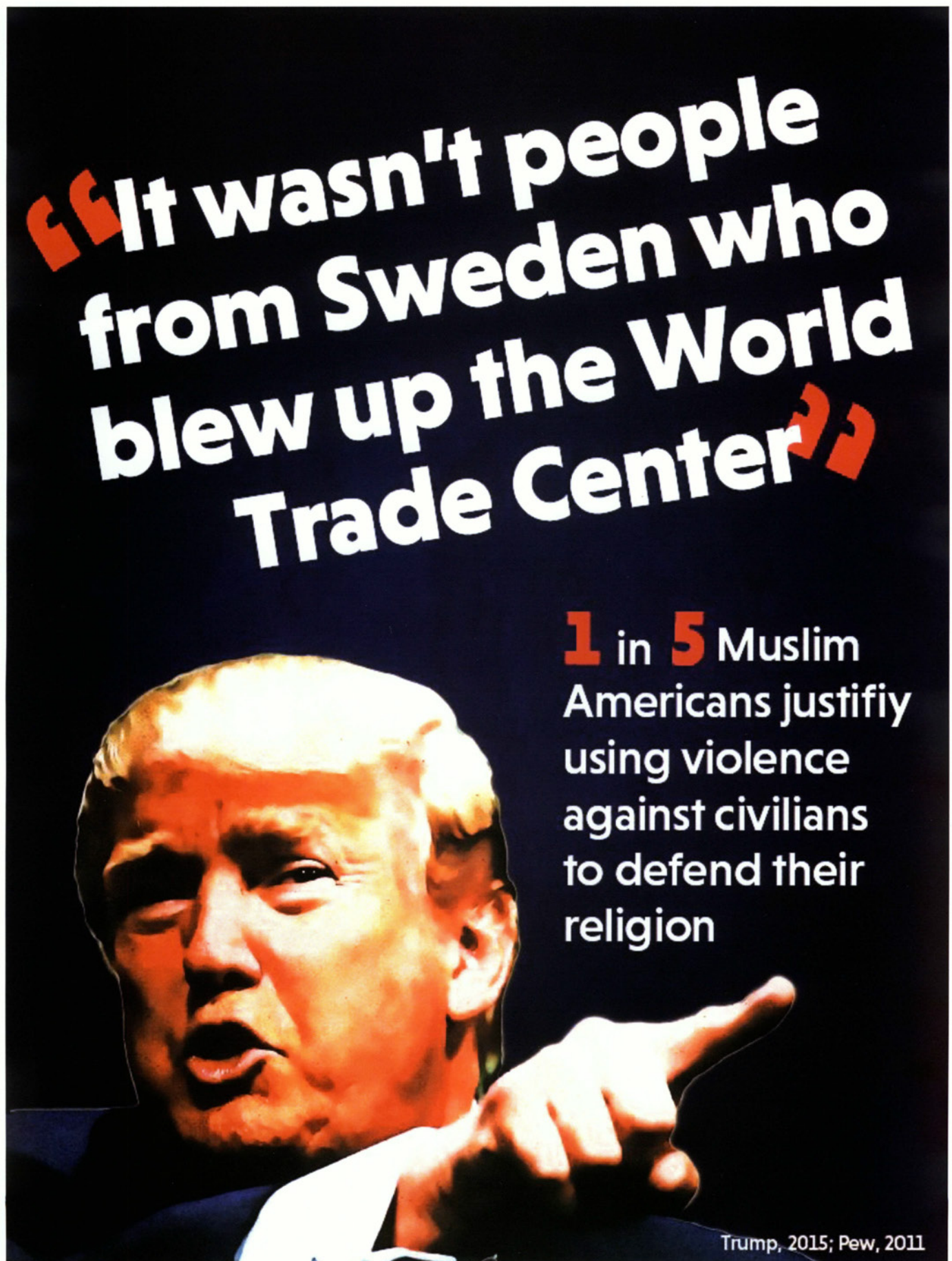
BE SMART

"The U.S. has enough problems without [...] openly mocking religion in order to provoke attacks and death."

**82% of Muslim
Americans agree that
using violence
against U.S. citizens is
NEVER justified**



Trump, 2014; Pew, 2011



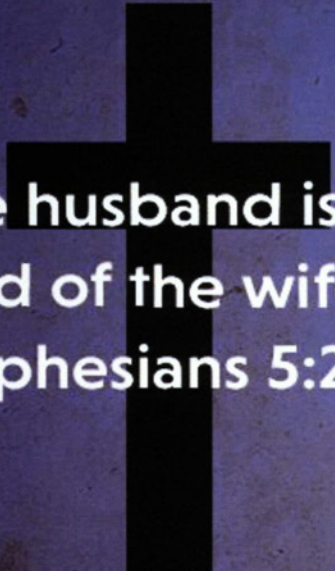
“It wasn't people from Sweden who blew up the World Trade Center”

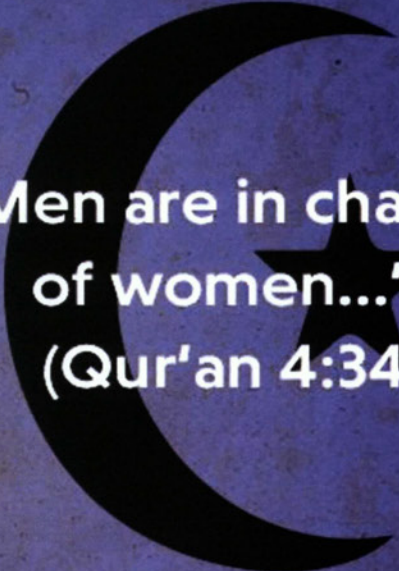
1 in **5** Muslim Americans justify using violence against civilians to defend their religion

Trump, 2015; Pew, 2011

OLD

BOOKS


"The husband is the
head of the wife..."
(Ephesians 5:23)


"Men are in charge
of women..."
(Qur'an 4:34)

OLD

VALUES

**THE MAJORITY OF MUSLIM AMERICANS SAY
THAT THEY WANT TO ADOPT AMERICAN
CUSTOMS AND WAYS OF LIFE. (PEW, 2011)**

MUSLIMS: NOT AMERICANS

**3/4 of Muslim
Americans see
themselves as
Muslim FIRST,
not American**

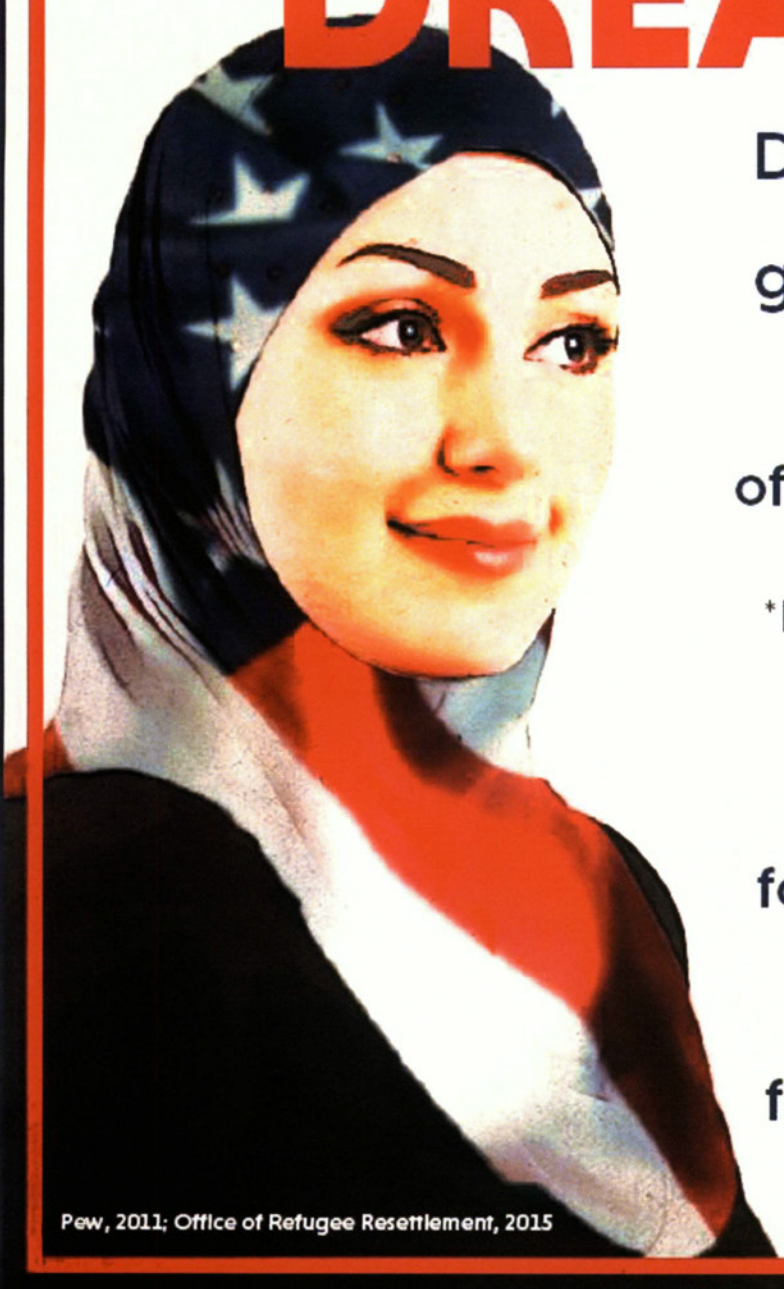
(Pew, 2011)

**The Qur'an:
"Let not
believers take
disbelievers
as allies"**

(Qur'an 3:28)



THE REAL AMERICAN DREAM



Does hard work
really lead to
greater success?

3/4

of Muslim Americans
think so.

*But only **62%** of other
Americans agree.

Refugee labor
force participation

=

American labor
force participation
from 2011-2015

Pew, 2011; Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015



I WANT MUSLIMS TO STOP FREELOADING

Nearly **1/3** of all Muslim Americans are
unemployed or underemployed.

\$285,856,800 paid out for refugee
cash and medical assistance in 2015

Pew, 2011; Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015

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